Suffered Under Pontius Pilate
Matthew 21:1-14
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High up in the Swiss Alps, picturesque Lake Lucerne sits at the base of Mt. Pilatus. According to legend, when the mists and fog extend from the water all the way up the mountain the ghost of Pontius Pilate may be seen, washing his hands over and over, moaning - "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

Did you ever wonder why, of all the people historically associated with Jesus, of all the heroic saints who lived with him and died for him, the name of Pontius Pilate is the only one, besides Mary his mother, immortanlized in the Apostles' Creed? Pilate - the pathetic puppet governor - guilty of allowing the most monstrous crime history has ever seen.

Why Pilate? Why not Peter or John? Why not Andrew or ST. Paul? Pilate's name is in the Creed because it places the life and person of Jesus Christ squarely in history. It is there to guard against the idea of a transcendent Christ about which it is exceedingly easy to forget that he was a man. The name Pontius Pilate, mentioned regularly in the text of the Creed, is a reminder that Jesus was a man; that his life and ministry occurred at a certain time, in a certain place. But more than that, Pilate is a symbol of the power structure of the world - which when confronted with the absolute love and absolute integrity of Jesus Christ could do none other than consent to his crucifixion. He is the symbol of the way men dealt with Jesus 2,000 years ago, and the way they have been dealing with him ever since - washing his hands, desperately trying to avoid making a decision about him.

We have been thinking about the meaning and relevance of the ancient Apostles' Creed. Today we come to the phrase "Suffered under Pontius Pilate." We come to it now also because on this day the final, symbolic confrontation between the two men - Jesus and Pilate - the two opposing forces, if you will, set in motion.

There were, it is estimated, more than two million pilgrims crowding into the city of Jerusalem during the week before the Passover. Many of them were from Galilee: from the towns and villages Jesus had visited. These people heard that he was coming into the city and decided to meet him. When they went outside of the city gates to accompany him they were greeted by a strange and thrilling sight. He was riding on the back of an ass - something he rarely did, something uncharacteristic and unnecessary because he was travelling just from Bethany, about a mile and a half away. Immediately they recognized what they were seeing: "Lo, your king comes to you, humbly and lowly, and riding on an ass." The prophet Zechariah had promised that centuries before, and they could not help but believe what they were seeing. It was actually happening. He was coming. This one - this Lord - was coming in to the historic city of David, the city of the Temple with its rich heritage - in the precise way the Messiah was supposed to come. And so they tore the clothes from their backs, and the branches from the trees and laid them in his path, cheering, yelling "Now save us! Hosanna! Hosanna!"

The accounts differ at this point, but Matthew's Gospel relates that Jesus went directly to the Temple and there forcibly and violently ejected the money changers and the salesmen of sacrificial animals. Then he taught and healed. Apparently he entered the city every day and left again in the evening. But on this, the first day in the week of the Passover he set in motion the forces that would destroy him five days later. It was sone thing to go from town to town in Galilee, teaching and healing among its rolling hills and gentle people. It was another thing altogether to ride right into the historic capital of the nation with a noisy mob clamouring something about him being a King.

If it was the most crucial week in the brief life of Jesus Christ, we might assume that it was the most miserable week in the pathetic life of the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. All he wanted was a measure of tranquility - a Passover

week without any of the ugliness and violence that had marked some of his other relationships with his subjects. The fact of the matter was that Pilate was on the spot. IOn several occasions in the past he had badly misunderstood the religious sensitivities of these strange Jews with their one God. On more than one occasion things had gotten out of hand when Pilate turned his legionnaires in crowds of Jews protesting an affront to their religious convictions. Word of unrest had been sent to Caesar - and Pilate could ill afford to have it happen again. His political career - his very life was at stake.

So it is that we find this personification of Imperial Roman power spending much of this time during the week trying desperately to find the least common denominator; trying desperately to avoid making a decision that might endanger his own carerr.

It is obvious that he felt no ill will toward Jesus. It is obvious that he wasn't very impressed with the charges brought against him by the Jewish Sanhedrin. In fact, there is a faint hint that the prisoner touched something deep inside Pilate and that there was a bond of empathy between them - two men - caught by circumstances. In any case, when the Temple authorities first brought Jesus to him, Pilate placed the whole matter before the puppet king of Galilee, only to have it thrown back in his lap. Then he had Jesus whipped with thongs of leather with sharp bits of lead on the end, and presented him to his accusers, bloody, beaten- hoping that the ghastly sight would draw feelings of mercy from them. Then he appealed to the crowd - he would grant the traditional Passover favor - he would release this prisoner who obviously was not guilty. But the crowd chose a murderer and a revolutionary instead. Finally there were no other options. By now the crowd had become a mob - and was demanding his execution. That was the least common denominator. All things considered, that was the path of expediency. And so Pontius Pilate, the one man with the authority to pronounce the death penalty in the province, did what he had to do. He ordered his men to carry out the crucifixion. Oddly, he mustered his courage - and before the eyes of the mob - their mad desire having been granted - he washed his hands of the whole affair.

The ultimate suffering of Jesus Christ, his arrest and public humiliation, his physical torture and terrible death on the cross - all came at the washed hands of Pontius Pilate. And the lingering irony is that Pilate didn't intend for any of it to happen. Jesus suffered because he came to Jerusalem - and because a man called Pontius Pilate acted like a man, in a very understandable way. He took the path of expediency.

This day, Palm Sunday, plays a contrapuntal melody - two themes - in direct opposition to each other. Jesus forcing the decision: coming to the city- to the place where the nation lived. Pilate - back-treading, doing everything humanly possible to avoid making a decision, and finally allowing the crucifixion to be done.

A lot of comfortabel myths were laid to rest by the events of that fateful day. First - that the Gospel of Jesus Christ - the good news he came bringing - has fundamentally to do with individual comfort and succor: that faith is individual belief and has nothing to do with large groups of people gathered as corporate entities. I suspect the friends of Jesus wanted it that way. I can almost hear them warning him not to go into the city. But he came; he brought the word of God to that place where the Jewish nation received its identity. He came to the focal point of the whole people of God, to Mt. Zion, there to be received or rejected - not individually - but corporately.

Second, the myth that religion can be conveniently segregated from the rest of life - the secular and worldly, was dramatically destroyed. Jerusalem was the capital: politically, it is where the decisions were made: socially it is where words like justice were given meaning: economically, it was the hub of the nation's commercial life. That is where Jesus came - as King - to the very heart of secular life - to the center of all things secular.

Third, the myth that he represented just one more religious cult: that his was a philosophic concept that could be accepted, rejected or ignored was finally and totally eliminated. His deliberate manner of coming into the city forced everyone to decide. There could be no neutrality after Palm Sunday. For those who preferred to remain on the fence, like Pontius Pilate, were terribly guilty of collaborating in his death. He left no room for the comfortable myth of neutrality.

This day destroyed all those myths - but somehow they still exist. Somehow, through the grossest kind of self deception religious people insist on embracing the myths that died on Palm Sunday.

We are still hung up on a definition of Christian evangelism as the saving of a lot of individual souls. Even though our Lord moved beyond this and came to the city - we would like to insist that the faithfulness of a denomination or a congregation can be measured in terms of the number of names on its roll.

Even though he bravely marched into the maelstrom of all that is worldly and political and secular, the myth that religion and politics, religion and economics, religion and social problems do not mix, still enjoys vigorous health. In 1964 the Internal Revenue Service revoked the tax-exempt status of an organization called the "Fellowship of Reconciliation" with the public rationale: "The pursuit of peace, disarmament and the reconciliation of nations is not a religious but a political activity." (Christian Century, March 20, 1963, p.357) That is prophetic. That, in a real sense, "tells it like it still is."

Because Jesus Christ chose to confront Jerusalem, the fact that people are dying in Viet Nam, and children starving in Biafra, and little ones retarded because of malnutrition in this nation, and adults languishing in hopeless despair in the rotting ghettoes across the land - is a religious problem. Or the fact that a whole community adamantly refuses to acknowledge its own racism - or that people can't find jobs or homes - or others who genuinely care - is a religious problem.

Even though Jesus Christ consciously and deliberately forced every individual in the city of Jerusalem to make a decision about him - the myth is still very much alive that neutrality about things religious is still possible.

Not very many people are overtly hostile toward Christianity and the church today, in the same way that Pilate was not opposed to Jesus Christ. But about half the people belong to the church and about half that number participate: and that means that at least three quarters of the people of this nation and this comm unity are still trying to play the game of neutrality. But it can't be played. Jesus Christ has made it impossible. Pontius Pilate tried and is remembered eternally as the man with the blood of the Son of God on his hands.

Legend has it that the ghost of Pontius Pilate hovers over Lake LUcerne, washing his hands and moaning, "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Christ?" By indecision - by tragic, unnecessary, impossible neutrality - Pilate had him crucified.

On this day we remember that our Lord came to the city of Jerusalem and for one fleeting moment of time was greeted as the King. Let us not forget the eternal significance of that sojourn. Let us not forget that the myths were laid to rest and that neutrality crucified him.

Let us acknowledge that the significance of this day is that Jesus Christ comes into the midst of our common life - and right into your life and mine. Let us acknowledge that there is nothing in our common life - nor any area of our individual lives that does not have to do with him. Let us acknowledge that he has made our safe, blase neutrality quite impossible.

Let us sing our "hosannas" and remember that on this day he "Suffered under Pontius Pilate."

Amen.